

VZCZCXRO3501
OO RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSI #1890 2841511
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 101511Z OCT 08
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0248
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TBILISI 001890

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/10/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: GOVERNMENT REVIEWS MAESTRO LICENSE,
AGREES TO POLITICAL PROGRAMMING

REF: TBILISI 1602

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Speaker of Parliament Bakradze announced October 10 that the Parliament would modify the nature of the license for the radio station Maestro to enable it to broadcast political talk shows. Maestro, whose request to expand its entertainment broadcasting to include political programming, had lost in court in its effort to gain a new license. Deputy Foreign Minister Bokeria told emboff that after consultations with the Parliament and the Georgian National Communication Commission, the Government reached a verbal deal with Maestro -- a friendly settlement that will permit Maestro to broadcast political programs. He said that the license would take a few weeks to go into effect, but that Maestro would soon be back on the air. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment. In recent conversations with senior members of Saakashvili's cabinet, Post has urged Georgia's leadership to review closely its efforts to support a free and independent media and to move quickly to implement the President's ambitious reform agenda which he announced to Parliament on September 16 (reftel A). We have urged senior officials to take concrete steps to lead the way on democratic reform in order to counter Russian allegations that Saakashvili is not committed to democratic reform and to convince skeptical European allies that Georgia is ready for MAP accession. The Government's decision to work with Maestro to end the licensing dispute is an important signal that Saakashvili's government heard our concerns. End Comment.

MAESTRO LICENSE

¶3. (C) Poloff met with Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria to express concern over a recent court ruling which denied a broadcast license to a regional cable production company "Maestro." Maestro is financed by the brother of opposition leader Levan Gachechiladze. In March 2008 the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC) revoked their broadcast license due to legitimate violations of their previous broadcast license. Polof urged the government to consider that issuance of their license at this time could persuade critics that the President remains committed to media freedom in Georgia. Some critics were beginning to call for conditionality to U.S. assistance to Georgia and it was important that President Saakashvili act decisively to prove that conditionality was not necessary.

¶4. (C) The Deputy FM understood the need to revisit the license issue and said that the government would discuss with the GNCC. He encouraged U.S. observers to follow upcoming domestic developments closely and promised that the government would soon take a range of actions based on U.S. advice and urging. In a separate meeting with Ambassador Tefft on October 8, Speaker of the Parliament David Bakradze also promised to review the status of the Maestro license. On a related topic, Both Bakradze and Bokeria predicted that a new wave of talk shows reflecting a variety of political

view points would soon be on the airwaves.

¶15. (SBU) On October 10, Bokeria informed the Embassy that the government, members of the Parliamentary majority and minority, the GNCC and representatives of Maestro had reached a "friendly agreement" ending the dispute over Maestro's license. Bokeria believed that the formal decision would take several weeks to be issued, but the announcement regarding the decision has already been made public by Speaker Bakradze and the Parliament.

NEW PARTY FUNDING MODEL TO BE LAUNCHED
QNEW PARTY FUNDING MODEL TO BE LAUNCHED

¶15. (C) DFM Bokeria also informed Poloff that, as a result of the discussion between the Secretary and President Saakashvili in July 2008, the President had decided to propose the German "Stiftung" model for party funding. Details were still being worked out, but he predicted that resources available to parties -- including those which did not accept seats in the Parliament -- would increase significantly. Also in response to U.S. urging, Bokeria predicted that the new criminal procedure code could be passed by Parliament before the end of October.

TEFFT